

BOOK REVIEW

Dagmar Schäfer, Annapurna Mamidipudi and Marius Buning (eds.), *Ownership of Knowledge: Beyond Intellectual Property*

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023. Pp. 394. ISBN 978-0-262-54559-4. \$65.00 (paperback); 978-0-262-37464-4. \$0.00 (open-access PDF).

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Much ink has been spilt and many a pixel corralled in documenting histories of that peculiar modern fiction: ‘intellectual property’ (IP). Although seen as an unproblematic commodity for those who profit from monopolized knowledge, the very possibility and indeed moral legitimacy of legally ‘owning’ ideas has long been debated in many cultures. Numerous creative individuals have reluctantly secured defensive patent or copyright protection over their original creations to thwart appropriation by predatory corporations. Some chapters in this volume rehearse such historical dramas of past proprietorial arms races, notably Chapter 9 by Myles Jackson, ‘Ownability, ownership, knowledge, and genetic information in the United States’. While Jackson laments that ‘intellectual property still plays a major role in biomedical research’ – at least in the United States – his study of bio-capitalism does point insightfully to the ‘instability of ownership and knowability’ for genetic information (p. 293).

More distinctive of the collection are chapters that overtly look ‘beyond intellectual property’ to offer a broader pluralist, irenic vision of past – and future – knowledge organization. The editorial preface closes with this unconventional yet symptomatic claim: ‘We do not claim ownership of our publication, because insight should not be owned. We do, however, take responsibility for the word we have coined to give this insight space to grow and have an impact in the real world: kn/own/able’ (p. x). Whatever readers make of this slashy postmodern neologism (see further discussion below), it is with laudable consistency that the entire book is available free to download at the MIT Press website. It is not, of course, the first such study to be published open-access: for nearly twenty years Michele Boldrin and David K. Levine’s provocatively libertarian *Against Intellectual Monopoly* (Cambridge, 2010) has been online, offering historically informed arguments against the exclusionary privileges wrought through (mis)use of IP’s legal protection (www.dklevine.com/general/intellectual/against.htm). Characteristically, however, like so much of the canon of (Western-focused) IP history, Boldrin and Levine are acknowledged only once in this volume, *en passant* in Marius Buning’s Chapter 3, ‘Teaching intellectual property: constructing the historical narrative of intellectual property in university textbooks’. Most other contributors shun mainstream historical IP literature, adopting a cultural perspective far removed from the canons of capitalist anglophone legislation.

Given Dagmar Schäfer's editorial role and distinguished credentials as a historian of Chinese culture, it is both fascinating and reassuring to see strong Sinophile elements running through this book. We see these in Chapter 1's editorial introduction 'Excavations of knowledge ownership'; in Chapter 2, Cynthia Brokaw's piece 'Intellectual property with Chinese characteristics'; and Chapter 8, Schafer's solo-authored 'Names for work: crafts, bureaucracy, and Law in Yuan and Ming China (thirteenth to seventeenth century)'. As a welcome addition to our somewhat limited Anglophile grasp of Chinese IP history, those chapters would justify acquisition of this volume. Being attentive to the modalities of how knowledge might be owned, by whom and on what terms outside the Euro-American mainstream, these chapters debunk the weary cliché that Chinese culture has only recently recognized individualist claims over creative knowledge.

Complementing this globalizing approach we also find chapters on musical 'Carnatic' knowledge in south India (Chapter 4 by Annapurna Mamidipudi and Viren Murthy) and the 'aesthetic' of 'traditional knowledge' cultures in Papua New Guinea (James Leach, Chapter 7). Amy Slaton's Chapter 6, 'Educational inequities and the distribution of technical knowledge: three instruments', draws us back to more conventional US-centred preoccupations, even as it meditates on charming stories of bananas in shoeboxes. But at least Slaton attempts to engage with the editorial neologism outlined above, albeit somewhat abstractly, by claiming that the 'idea of "kn/own/ables" grounding this volume captures well how the particular imaginable ways of knowing in a given historical setting preset the possibility of possessing knowledge, which also entails dispossession' (p. 200).

Readers will have to judge for themselves whether the 'kn/own/able' theme effectively unites the volume, or whether instead it reveals the editors' overambition in aiming to establish the theoretical inseparability of knowledge and ownership. Perhaps more usefully empirical in exploring this theme is Chapter 5 by Marjolijn Bol, 'Imitating crackles: material mimesis in stones and textiles'. Here we see how both traditional Chinese and European luxury artefacts were made by artificially reproducing the 'crackle' of batik and gemstones, the authors of such fabrications allegedly acquiring some category of ownership thereby. By contrast, Lissant Bolton's Chapter 10, 'Objects, knowledge, and museum: reflections on the endangered material knowledge project', explores the importance of her own ethnographic research on the cultures and artefacts of Vanuatu to create accessible digital repositories; these aim to preserve knowledge that is vulnerable to disappearance without proper cross-cultural collaborative curation.

What Bolton's chapter highlights importantly is the significance of *sharing* knowledge at least as much as 'owning' it. This issue will surely strike readers looking at the book's front-cover illustration of the process of tanning leather hides. Schäfer and Mamidipudi stress in their introduction 'Ownership of knowledge' that 'developing and learning or teaching tanning, for instance, implies notions of how knowledge is gained – and thus owned, and given away – through sharing' (p. 1). While the editors focus on the 'ownership' issues (leaving it indeterminate whether it is individual humans or collectives that 'own' such knowledge), readers might be forgiven for reflecting that 'sharing' might be the more empirically and ethically interesting process here. For in a world of Uber, Spotify and social media, where so much is hired and or shared rather than owned, might it be that the *sharing* of knowledge deserves a future historically informed volume to challenge the dominance of proprietary IP narratives?